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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION REPORT - Mideast: Sharon's Health and
Political Implications

PARIS - Friday, January 06, 2006

(A) SUBJECTS COVERED IN TODAY'S REPORT:

Mideast: Sharon's Health and Political Implications

B) SUMMARY OF COVERAGE:

Practically every single front page and editorial is devoted to Sharon, his state of health, his legacy and the political fallout for Israel, the region and beyond. Among the many points of views, Le Figaro gives a succinct wrap up with the following titles: "Washington Loses an Ally;" "The Arab World Without Regrets" and "The Peace Process in Danger." While "Israel Holds its Breath" (Liberation) the questions surrounding "Peace or War" (France Soir) and the future of the peace process are raised by most commentators. For Patrick Saint Paul in Le Figaro, "the political uncertainty could play into the hands of the radicals," while Washington correspondent Philippe Gelie emphasizes that "Sharon knew how to play up to the White House." Le Figaro's editorial entitled "Israel Orphaned Without Sharon" notes: "never before had Israel put its future so completely in the hands of such a dominating figure." The editorial in Liberation praises Sharon for his "Realism" and suggests: "Statesmen may well need age before they can also become realists. But with age comes illness and (political) weakness." Catholic La Croix widens the scope and titles "The World Concerned for the Post-Sharon" while editorialist Dominique Quinio says: "the Middle East did not need this extra battle." (See Part C)

All dailies conjecture about the possible successor for Sharon as they recount the political ascension of a man who was also known as the "Bulldozer." This is the term retained by communist l'Humanite which headlines: "The Bulldozer" Leaves Everything in Ruins."

France Soir interviews Charles Enderlin, the permanent correspondent for France 2 Television in Jerusalem, and an expert on the region: "Sharon needed a few more years in order to mark the history books. In his confrontation with Arafat, he finally came out the winner, but he did not have the opportunity to lead his victory to its confines. He was a few years short of leading his plan to success."

Other stories include Iran, with a major report in Le Figaro entitled "The CIA's Dangerous Missteps in Iran," which uses the book by James Risen "State of War, the Secret of the CIA and the Bush Administration" for background. Philippe Gelie reports that the CIA "gave the Iranians the blueprint for building the bomb; the Iranians later fooled the Americans: not only did they see what was wrong with the blueprint, they were able to fix it and use it."

Two deaths from Avian flu in Turkey are widely reported. Commentators note that these are the first two such cases outside Asia. Electronic media report on a third death in the same family.

President Chirac's priorities for France, digital technology and nuclear energy, are front paged in centrist La Tribune, which entitles its editorial: "Vision or Myopia?" Pascal Aubert comments: "Chirac is hardly at death's door. He is all of a sudden playing at being a visionary, something he has never been. But as always he is using the stage for himself rather than for coherent ideas. His problem is more a matter of myopia than vision. He alone manages not to see the incoherence of his plans, such as taxing industry at the risk of penalizing innovation, or keeping sectors alive through intravenous artificial support, all the while talking about technological leaps. France's industry could well end up having to fight for survival with its hands tied behind its back."

C) SUPPORTING TEXT/BLOCK QUOTES:

Mideast: Sharon's Health and Political Implications

"The White House Loses its `Best Ally'"

Philippe Gelie in right-of-center Le Figaro (01/06): "The Washington Post's headline intimating that Bush could be losing his best ally gave the measure of what is at stake for the U.S. if Sharon leaves the political scene. But the implications are not necessarily that Washington might be weakened. Although Sharon was a precious ally, he was not a trump card for U.S. diplomacy: he knew like no one else how to play up to the White House in order to keep the Bush Administration's support while staying clear of having things imposed on him. The balance of power between the two men was never what it seemed on the surface. Today, as far as the U.S. administration is concerned, all of Sharon's potential successors have faults. But for a President who has made the Middle East his privileged field of action, they can all shift the balance of power."

"Israel Orphaned Without Sharon"

Pierre Rousselin in right-of-center Le Figaro (01/06): "Almost single handed, Sharon managed to extricate Israel from the Gaza strip. Today, Israel is in a state of shock. The man who for most of his life embodied Israel's battles, managed towards the end to garner unanimous support as a leader who rallied his people. Never before had Israel put its future so completely in the hands of such a dominating figure. Indifferent to political and diplomatic pressures, Sharon managed to impose his views on Israel. As the inventor of a peace process `a la unilateral' he surprised everyone. In this regard he operated a change and accepted the notion that Israel's security would not be served through expansion. Still, the man who was nicknamed the `Bulldozer' never changed his method of `fait accompli.' Sharon needed more time: no one is in the wings to take over. His absence from the political scene is a harsh wakeup call for Israel's politicians. After following one man, a dangerous return to normalcy means divisions and ungovernable coalitions. And certainly new violence."

"Realism"

Gerard Dupuy in left-of-center Liberation (01/06): "Sharon waged all of Israel's wars, including before Israel existed as a nation. He was known for his brutality and his expansionist views. But Sharon managed to overcome his past as a hawk. His gesture in Gaza took on a historic importance: with the pullout, he was able to erase the fatal illusion of Greater Israel and pulled the Israeli society away from the stigma of nationalism and extremism. The gesture opened the door to something resembling a `peace process,' which might some day be launched again. Statesmen probably need age before such realism comes to them. But age weakens those to whom it brings wisdom. Israel's elections looked clear-cut. It is no longer so."

"Israel's Changing of the Guard"

Dominique Quinio in Catholic La Croix (01/06): "The Middle East did not need this added battle. Sharon's stroke upsets not only Israel and its people; it is a major upset for the country's political future because Israel relied so completely on a single individual. The entire world has its eyes glued to that region of the world. Sharon's pragmatism and his strength gave the impression that Israel might be on its way to peace with its neighbors, while it ensured its security. The reaction of the Palestinian authority, not the Arab street, shares in the world's concern. Mahmoud Abbas needs an interlocutor who is determined and tenacious. Political uncertainties in Israel could destabilize him even more as both the Israelis and the Palestinians are called to vote. The window of opportunity that opened with Arafat's death and Sharon's surprise initiatives could be endangered. Let us hope there is someone to take over and keep the window open."

"Ruse and Reason"

Serge Faubert in right-of-center France Soir (01/06): "A strange paradox in politics is proven once again: more often than not, it is a hawk rather than a dove who ends wars. Sharon is one more proof of the axiom. The man known for Sabra and Chatila, for triggering the Second Intifada and for keeping Arafat sequestered in Ramallah with no regard to international law, will also be remembered for, and maybe exclusively for, his pullout plan from Gaza. His plan was an illustration of his quasi-intuitive pragmatism. Sharon decided to make peace all by himself: his method was expeditious as always. But he was the only figure who could impose such a policy on the settlers. We may never know whether he also planned to pull out from the West Bank. History is at times totally amoral. The fact that it chose a perfectly hateful individual to achieve the first steps towards peace may please no one. But so what: this was the price to pay to stop the bloodshed." HOFMANN